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Using students' evaluations to measure educational quality

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Abstract

This research study examined university students' evaluation of teaching at an English preparatory school. Twelve students who participated in the study were chosen as a consequence of theoretical sampling because they repeated the intermediate level twice and were believed to give valuable information regarding the challenges encountered in the program. Aims of the study were to: (1) demonstrate quality assurance at program implementation level, (2) get feedback from students on the appropriateness of activities for their learning needs, (3) get students to reflect on their language skills development and identify what they still need to learn that could be useful for the improvement of teaching, (4) raise awareness and persuade students to engage with the opportunities for learning beyond classroom and (5) negotiate emphases for the remainder of the program. Participants were asked to comment on and evaluate the educational quality, course objectives, performance of their instructor, their learning, achievement and progress, course materials, learning support they received, role of information and communication technology, and assessment procedures. Data was collected by Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality Instrument (SEEQ), focus group interviews and field notes. Findings revealed certain action points for the development of the English language teaching program.

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1. Introduction

Students have a great role in maintaining quality and enhancing learning due to their engagement in the processes of internal quality assurance. Many roles are attributed to them. Among many metaphors the two most common ones are the notions of students as consumers and students as co-producers. Furthermore, it is often accepted that their role is identified as being central to creativity and innovation in

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teaching and learning. Therefore, students have great impact in shaping vision and encouraging universities to adapt and improve their services. Little and Williams (2010) focus on students' contribution in the form of assuring the quality of the students' experience through questionnaires and surveys and representation on staff/student committees at course and departmental levels. Furthermore, there are institutional governance and accountability mechanisms that are established through student representation bodies which in return help prospective students by informing their choices. Also, students are able to express their views to government and higher education policy-makers since they are members of external institutional audit teams and national student representative bodies (Little & Williams, 2010).

Course evaluation has long been adopted as a routine exercise among university English language preparatory schools in Turkey as a result of an institutional response to the demand for course development. Students' evaluations are treated as an illuminating measure since they have the appeal of being objective and precise provided that it is a well-explained practice which utilizes a reliable measurement. On the other hand, there are some reservations by teachers towards student ratings on the grounds of uncertainty as to how students rate teaching performance and how these ratings apply in 'tenure and promotion decisions'. Ting (1998) underlines the reflection of educational culture on students' ratings, focusing on changing concepts which also relate to the Turkish educational context such as paternalistic authority, unconditional respect for teachers, which assumes that students are not expected to criticize their teachers, and concludes that teachers may have confidence in students' ratings of teaching performance if there is a clear understanding of its meaning. Furthermore, some studies (Hamilton, 1980; Ware & Williams, 1979, 1980) suggest that students prioritize entertainment and generosity of given grades while judging teaching performance and rating their learning experience. However, many studies conclude that sources of such biases do not pose threats to the overall validity of student ratings (Marsh & Overall, 1980; Costin et al 1971; Hildebrand, Wilson & Diesnt, 1971; Marsh 1980; McKeachie, 1973, 1979).

One outcome of the research into student evaluation was the development of the Student Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ). In the development of SEEQ, a large item pool was constructed by analyzing the students' evaluations of teaching literature and having interviews with teachers and students. Then, students and teachers were asked to rate the importance of items. Teachers evaluated the potential usefulness of the items as a basis for feedback, and teachers' perceptions were screened against open-ended student comments in order to see whether important aspects had been excluded. These efforts and psychometric analysis contributed to the selection of items and the content validity of SEEQ. The factor analytic support has identified nine factors of teaching effectiveness (Learning/Value, Enthusiasm, Organization, Group Interaction, Individual Rapport, Breadth of Coverage, Exams, Assignments, Workload/Difficulty) that the SEEQ is designed to measure (Marsh *et al*, 1997).

Given that SEEQ may provide insights regarding program evaluation, this study aims at exploring Turkish university students' evaluation of teaching in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a Turkish university in terms of their learning experience.

1.1 Needs to be met by the program

The English language instruction school operates within a highly technological institution which provides laptops for the students and teachers, high speed wireless internet connection, projectors in all classes, and smart boards in some classes. The aim of the school of English language teaching is to teach the students English and academic skills that they will need in their freshman program and in their further academic studies at their departments. There are five levels in the English preparatory program; beginner,

pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. This study examines students' judgment of educational quality the repeat intermediate level. This level aims to take students from a developing level of competence defined as around A2 to a clearly intermediate level of competence, defined as B1 by the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR).

1.2 Program Description

This study attempted at evaluating the repeat intermediate course of the language program which runs for 8 weeks or 38 teaching days. There are four class contact hours each day, and some of these hours are allocated to tutorials when the need arises. In addition to tutorials, the instructor allocated three office hours per week to students to better assist them in academic needs. There are two course books that are used for this level: one for general English and one for academic listening skills. At the intermediate level students are required to fulfil a number of tasks for their Learning Portfolio (LP). Upon completion, instead of grades, students receive 'complete' or 'incomplete'. Completing all of these tasks is a prerequisite to sit the proficiency test, The Level Assessment Test (LAT), at the end of the level. To proceed to the next level, students need to have a 'complete' in all their LP tasks, attend 90% of classes and sit two test: The Mid-Module Achievement Test (MAT) - formative and Level Achievement Test (LAT) - summative. These tests are weighted at 15% and 80% respectively. Teachers give a class participation grade which constitutes 5% of the course grade. In the end students need to get 65% to exit the level.

1.3 Multi-Media Intervention

The university uses an online course management system (CMS) or Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE). The intermediate level is piloting an on-line component which operates on CMS. Teachers upload an array of tasks on a weekly basis that cater to the objectives of the course and assist students with the opportunity to practice language and skills beyond the classroom. The on-line component consists of reading, web-activity, forum, language, listening and writing.

1.4 Evaluation Questions

Grounded purposes that underlie this study reflect the set that was suggested by Kiely and Dickins (2005, 162) which comprise the following functions; (1) demonstrating quality assurance at the program implementation level, (2) getting feedback from students on the appropriateness of activities for their learning needs, (3) asking students to reflect on their language skills development and identify what they still need to learn that could be useful for the improvement of teaching, (4) raising awareness and persuade students to engage in the opportunities for learning beyond classroom, (5) negotiating emphases for the remainder of the program. The focus of evaluation was on course objectives, course materials, and students' achievement, learning support (tutorials, office hours and role of information and communication technology), assessment procedures, performance of the teacher, and suggestions for improvement.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample used in this study included twelve intermediate students (eight males and four females) and who were repeating this level for the second time. In this evaluation research study a theoretical

sampling was used in the collection of data. The students who were repeating the intermediate level for the second time were thought to be the best source to identify developmental areas of the program. The present study assumes that investigating the aspects of the quality of instruction may suggest insight and information about the intermediate course.

2.2 Data Collection Instruments

The instruments used in the data collection consisted of interviews, SEEQ questionnaires, eliciting the participants' opinions in the form of written documents, and field notes. The SEEQ survey was used as its primary data source. The interviews and the field notes were initially planned as a means of gathering information from different sources of qualitative data, to integrate the participants' perceptions into the final analysis, and to increase explanatory power of the evaluation.

2.3 Data Analysis

Response to the SEEQ were transferred onto SPSS and analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics. Transcripts of the interviews were made from the video recordings and were analyzed with a focus on meaning coding, condensing the meaning and interpreting. The categories were not previously determined and they emerged ad hoc in the process of coding and data analysis. In the end, data analysis of the interview transcripts revealed six categories which are; (1) access to learning , (2) student expectations, (3) appropriate instructional strategies, (4) exam orientation versus learning for life , (5) suggestions for improvement.

3. Evaluation Findings

3.1 SEEQ

Analysis of the SEEQ questionnaire indicated that respondents (n=12) perceived the difficulty of the course at varying degrees. Also, in terms of students' perception of themselves in specific areas of the course displayed variety. Data analysis revealed that students rated writing as their weakest area (M=2.4) followed by vocabulary (M=3.0) and grammar (M=3.1). In comparison, reading (M=3.6), speaking (M=3.6), and listening (M=3.5) were identified as the areas in which students perceived their performance as higher. With respect to their learning progress, the majority of the respondents (75%) stated that they found the course challenging. In the evaluation of their learning, two respondents (16.7%) stated that they understood and learned language and academic skills in this course in a very good way and four of them (33.3%) agreed that the course was good in this aspect. Two respondents (16.7%) indicated that they learned moderately. On the other hand, four respondents thought that their learning was poor (16.7%) and some others declared that their intake was very poor (16.7%) in the course.

More than half of the students (58%) believed that the on-line learning component poorly contributed to their learning better while some (42%) expressed positive perceptions. In terms of potential of this course in increasing students' interest in learning, results showed that half of the respondents thought their interest increased, whereas the other party thought that the course did not have any effect in this respect. The results conveyed that nearly all participants (92%) reported that the instructor was dynamic and energetic in conducting the course. The majority (84%) stated that the instructor improved the quality of the lessons with the use of humor. However, some respondents (50%) indicated that the instructor's style of presentation was not able to hold their interest during the class.

When the students rated the aspects of the course related to its organization, the instructor's explanations, course materials, the clarity of course objectives and relations between course objectives and materials were evaluated. It was revealed that except for two participants (17%) the majority had agreed that the instructor explained the objectives of the course and showed the relation between

materials that were used and the course objectives. As for group interaction, in terms of encouraging students to participate in class discussions, more than half of the participants (59%) concluded that they were invited to share their ideas and knowledge but some students (41%) reported that they didn't feel the same way. When students were asked questions about "breadth" and judged the performance of the instructor in using different teaching methods to cater for the different needs of students, there were a variety of responses. The majority of students expressed that instructor's teaching method helped them to learn moderately (41.7%), in a good way (25%) and in a very good way (16.7%). As for the extent the instructor uses information technology and course management system (CMS) effectively, the majority of responses (75%) revealed that the instructor's performance was positive varying equally between 'moderate', 'good' and 'very good'.

The students' response to constructs related to assessment resulted in the following statements. Except for two students (17%) who were satisfied with the methods of evaluating student work in LP and exams, half of the respondents (50%) rated assessment procedures as 'moderately fair' and 'appropriate'. Furthermore, for three respondents (25%), assessment was 'poor' in terms of fairness and appropriateness. One participant (8.3%) conveyed his/her perception as 'very poor'. The feedback on exams and LP was found to be valuable 'moderately' (67%) and 'good' (8.3%) by the large majority of the participants. The response related to assignments revealed that half of the students (50%) did not see the given homework as a valuable contributor to their learning. When students were asked to comment on the relation between doing homework and their learning, more than half stated that the relation was very poor (33.3%) and poor (25%). From a holistic point of view, the majority of participants responded that their language and academic skills had improved in this course at varying degrees including 'moderately' (33.3%), 'good' (41.7%) and 'very good' (8.3%).

3.2 Interviews and Field-Notes

Data analysis yielded that, with regards to access to learning, the level of difficulty in the intermediate course was affected by the grammar and vocabulary load, elements of linguistic challenge of the learning tasks introduced in on-line component, and lack of training in information technologies and study skills. In terms of student expectations, results demonstrated that the participants expected to be exposed to a transition and an orientation between high school and university, between other levels and intermediate, as well as between traditional teaching/ learning and on-line/blended learning. When they reported that they found the intermediate course difficult, they referred to the nature of the course which acts as a threshold level between general English and academic English. Furthermore, participating students claimed that they experienced a culture shock between their previous learning experiences at their secondary schools and university with respect to the roles they need to undertake at the university. With respect to appropriate instructional strategies, the participants focused on the performance of the teacher on the appropriateness of teaching strategies involving catering to mixed ability and diverse individual needs. In addition, learner centeredness and communicative teaching were claimed to be influential factors that could raise students' involvement, participation and motivation. The data on the category exam orientation versus learning for life reveals that some students are highly exam oriented where as some others focus on real-life use of their language competency and academic skills. In the evaluation discussion that focused on the category 'suggestions for improvement', students referred to the influence of testing on their performance and the progress and necessity to cater to individual students' needs, the importance of raising awareness of short-term and long term academic goals, and further arrangements in the LP component of the course. Respondents suggested a battery of ideas which involved: (1) getting counseling about academic goals and difficulties, (2) having remedial classes catering to variety of

productive and critical thinking skills, (3) reducing the weighting of the level achievement test, which accounted for 80% of their passing grade, and reducing the load of testing towards ongoing and performance based assessment, (4) increasing the teacher's assessment grade, (5) shifting the focus on mastery rather than completion of the tasks by giving a grade value to the LP tasks instead of getting them marked as 'complete' or 'incomplete'.

2. Conclusions and Implications

One of the purposes of the evaluation study was to demonstrate quality assurance at the program implementation level, and this aim was fulfilled to a limited extent because only one class participated in the study. However, sharing the results with the participants and discussing some key points that were put forward helped the researcher/teacher to feed in the students as well as the administration. Thus, it is important to refer to the learning dimension of the evaluation practice.

Another evaluation aim targeted getting feedback from students on the appropriateness of activities for their learning needs, and students provided data in response to this evaluation question. The evaluation study elicited from the students that they are in need of reflecting on their language skills development and identifying what they still need to learn both in the short term- at preparatory school- and long-term in their departments. Thus, establishing a timely and consistent feedback cycle could be used to inform students of their progress in comparison to the course objectives. This could also be useful for the improvement of teaching. Asking students to rate their performance against a criteria which reflects the course objectives, say on a weekly basis, may also raise awareness on how different parts of the course, in-class, on-line learning, and homework cater to the common needs and objectives.

In terms of raising awareness and persuading students to engage with the opportunities for learning beyond classroom the evaluation study provided some useful insights. Information technology literacy and skills training should be integrated into the curriculum design. The evaluation study was able to negotiate emphases for the remainder of the program with respect to IT skills integration, student self-evaluation of the learning process and progress, specifications of in-class supplementary materials and on-line learning materials, assessment procedures and certain expectations of the students from the course and the instructors.

3. Limitations

It is important to note here that this evaluation study relies on several lines of evidence which involve students' responses to a survey, focus group interviews and field notes. However, in addition to learning and teaching constructs other dimensions of a program such as management are not involved. While quality of teaching is an important construct in course evaluation, other perspectives should also be taken into consideration to evaluate the merit and worth of the program. Thus, it is necessary to make use of multi-faceted approaches to the evaluation of instructional quality.

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